DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 447 721 FL 026 523

TITLE	What Elementary Teachers Need To Know about Language. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-FL-00-06
PUB DATE	2000-11-00
NOTE	4p.; Digest summarizes a paper by Lily Wong Fillmore and Catherine Snow available at http://www.cal.org/ericcll.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0008
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, 4646 40th Street NW, Washington, DC 20016. For full text: http://www.cal.org/ericcll/DIGEST.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Education; *Elementary School Teachers; English; English (Second Language); *Knowledge Base for Teaching; Language Acquisition; *Linguistics; Literacy Education; *Oral Language; Second Language Learning; Spelling; *Teacher Education; *Written Language
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, education reforms have raised the educational bar for all children in the United States--including newcomers. These reforms place tremendous pressures on children and teachers. In addition to mastering the content-area curriculum, children must become skilled users of language. They must be highly competent in reading and writing to pass the various assessments that constitute gateways for completing school, getting into college, and finding jobs. Teachers need a wealth of content and pedagogical knowledge to ensure that they are providing appropriate instruction to all students. Teachers also need a thorough understanding of educational linguistics--how language figures in education. This foundation would support teachers' practice overall, and in particular, it would help them teach literacy skills, especially to English language learners. If approached coherently, preparation in educational linguistics would cover many items on lists of teacher competencies, such as skills in assessing children, individualizing instruction, and respecting diversity. This digest summarizes some basic aspects of oral and written language about which elementary teachers need expertise in order to promote literacy. (VWL)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

What Elementary Teachers Need to Know About Language

ED 447 721

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- ☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

FL 026 523

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

What Elementary Teachers Need to Know About Language

Over the past decade, education reforms have raised the educational bar that all children in the United States—including newcomers—must clear to finish school and participate in the economic and social world of the 21st century. These reforms place tremendous pressures on children and teachers: In addition to mastering the content-area curriculum, children must become skilled users of language. They must be highly competent in reading and writing to pass the various assessments that constitute gateways for completing school, getting into college, and finding jobs. Teachers need a wealth of content and pedagogical knowledge to ensure that they are providing appropriate instruction to all students. Teachers also need a thorough understanding of *educational linguistics*—how language figures in education. This foundation would support teachers' practice overall, and in particular, it would help them teach literacy skills (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), especially to English language learners (August & Hakuta, 1998). If approached coherently, preparation in educational linguistics would cover many items on lists of teacher competencies, such as skills in assessing children, individualizing instruction, and respecting diversity. This Digest summarizes some basic aspects of oral and written language about which elementary teachers need expertise in order to promote literacy. However, it is only one part of the formula for effective teaching. How literacy skills should be taught and how teachers can learn what they need to know about language are beyond the scope of this Digest.

What Should Classroom Teachers Know About Language?

Classroom teachers and other educators should be able to answer a basic set of questions regarding oral and written language. Underlying their knowledge should be an understanding that oral language proficiency developed first in the native language (and often in a second language) serves as the foundation for literacy and as the means for learning in school and out. Teachers need to know how written language contrasts with speech so they can help their students acquire literacy.

1. What are the basic units of language?

Teachers need to know that spoken language is composed of units, the smallest of which are sounds, called *phonemes* if they signal meaning differences (e.g., *bet* and *met* have different meanings because they start with different phonemes). Next come *morphemes*, sequences of sounds that form the smallest units of meaning in a language (*cat* is a morpheme of English and so is *-s*); *words*, consisting of one or more morphemes (*cats*); *phrases* (one or more words); and *sentences*. Crucial to an understanding of how language works is the notion of *arbitrariness*: Language units have no inherent meaning. A sequence of sounds that is meaningful in English may mean nothing at all in another language—or something quite different. Understanding the variety of structures that different languages and dialects use to show meaning can help teachers see the logic behind the errors in their students' language use.

2. What is regular, and what isn't? How do forms relate to each other?

Proficient English speakers take for granted language irregularities that can be puzzling to younger and less fluent language users. An important part of acquiring a vocabulary suitable for academic contexts is knowing how to parse newly encountered words into their morphemes, rather than simply treating them as "long words." Teachers need to be aware of the principles of word formation in English since such knowledge can aid students in vocabulary acquisition.

3. How is the lexicon (vocabulary) acquired and structured?

Most classroom teachers recognize the need to teach vocabulary. Often, they identify and define technical or unusual words in texts. But knowing a word involves more than knowing its definition: It takes many encounters with a word in meaningful contexts for students to acquire it. It also requires understanding how the word relates to similar forms, how it can be used grammatically, and how it relates to other words and concepts. Effective vocabulary instruction requires that teachers understand how words are learned in noninstructional contexts through conversation and reading.

4. Are vernacular dialects different from "bad English" and if so, how?

To realize that differences among regional and social dialects of English or another language are a matter of regular, contrasting patterns in their sound systems, grammar, and lexicons—rather than errors—educators need a solid grounding in sociolinguistics and in language behavior across cultures. Schools must help children who speak vernacular varieties of English master the standard variety required for academic development, and they must respect the dialects that children use in their families and primary communities. Recognizing how language influences adults' perceptions of children and how adults relate to children through language is crucial to teachers' work. Educators need enough knowledge to keep speakers of vernacular dialects from being misdiagnosed and misplaced in school programs. In addition, they need knowledge about language variability in order to make sound decisions about instruction.

5. What is academic English?

Academic English is a cognitively demanding and relatively decontextualized register (Cummins, 1984). It relies on a broad knowledge of words, concepts, language structures, and interpretation strategies. Skills related to mastery of academic English include summarizing, analyzing, extracting and

interpreting meaning, evaluating evidence, composing, and editing.

Acquiring academic English is a challenge for both English language learners and native speakers. Few children arrive at school competent in this register. For the most part, academic English is learned over the course of schooling through frequent engagement in classroom talk, reading textbooks, and writing. Teachers need to recognize that all students need support to acquire the structures and vocabulary associated with academic English, and they need to know how to provide it.

6. Why has the acquisition of English by non-English speaking children not been more universally successful?

English language learners may be having a harder time learning English for academic success. Regardless of instructional program (e.g., bilingual, ESL, structured immersion), students who have entered school speaking little or no English may not be receiving the instruction they require to master academic English. Many teachers have been given misguided advice about what works for teaching English language learners—from letting children acquire the language naturally, to simplifying language use, to avoiding error correction. The message has been that direct instruction has no role. Fillmore (1991) found that children who are successful in acquiring English interact directly and frequently with people who know the language well. Such expert speakers not only provide access to the language, they also provide clues as to how to combine and communicate ideas, information, and intentions. Teachers must know enough about language and language learning to evaluate the appropriateness of various methods, materials, and approaches for helping students succeed.

7. Why is English spelling so complicated?

Unlike some other languages, English has not changed its spelling to eliminate inconsistencies and reflect changes occurring in its sound system over time. In addition, English generally retains the spelling of morphological units, even when the rules of pronunciation mean that phonemes within these morphological units vary (e.g., the second /k/ sound in *electric* and the /s/ sound in *electricity* have the same spelling). Errors in spelling can result from writers' inclination to write what they hear. English language learners' spelling errors may reflect limited exposure to written English forms, inadequate instruction, and transfer of general spelling strategies from another language. Understanding the complexities of English orthography can help teachers take sensible approaches to teaching it. Knowing how orthographies of different languages are organized also can help teachers figure out why spelling is more difficult for some students and why students make certain errors.

8. Why do students have trouble with narrative and expository writing?

All students need to learn the rhetorical structures associated with story telling and the various kinds of expository writing in English. However, many students bring to this task culturally based text structures that contrast with those expected at school. The emphasis in mainstream English stories is on getting the sequence of events correct and clear. This can seem so obviously correct to the monolingual speaker of English that the narrative of the Latino child, who emphasizes personal relationships more than plot, or that of the Japanese child, who may provide very terse stories, can be dismissed as incomprehensible (McCabe, 1995). Similarly with expository writing, argument structure varies across cultures. The topic sentences, paragraphs, and essays that are staples of English prose may be more difficult for students whose language experience includes other ways of expression.

9. How should the quality and correctness of a piece of writing be judged?

Teachers must have a solid-enough knowledge of grammar to support children's writing development and pinpoint problems in writing and interpreting text. Partly because teachers may feel insecure about their own writing, partly because students are not given opportunities to write frequently, and partly because teachers of writing are sometimes reluctant to correct students' writing, students may not be receiving the kind of corrective feedback that will help them be better writers. This problem is particularly acute for English language learners.

10. What makes a sentence or text difficult to understand?

Many educators erroneously associate simple sentences with ease in understanding and interpretation. For this reason, texts for English language learners are often composed of short, choppy sentences. The unintended result is that these simplified texts are far less readable than regular texts and may be insulting to readers. Moreover, because simplified texts are often unnatural, they cannot serve as exemplars of written academic English. With teachers' help, students can use well-written, grade-appropriate texts to learn content-area knowledge—as well as the vocabulary, grammatical structures, and rhetorical devices associated with academic writing.

Conclusion

As schools become increasingly diverse, education reforms will continue to put pressure on educators to provide appropriate instruction for all students. Teachers will continue to need access to a wide range of information to help students succeed, including information about the language that many of their students are learning. A thorough knowledge base in educational linguistics will support teachers' work overall and make school a place for students to succeed.

References

August, D., & Hakuta, K. (Eds.). (1998). *Educating language minority children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Cummins, J. (1984). *Bilingualism and special education: Issues in assessment and pedagogy*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

Fillmore, L.W. (1991). Second language learning in children: A model of language learning in social context. In E. Bialystok (Ed.), *Language processing by bilingual children* (pp. 49-69). New York: Cambridge University Press.

McCabe, A. (1995). *Chameleon readers: Teaching children to appreciate all kinds of good stories*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Snow, C.E., Burns, M.S., & Griffen, P. (Eds.). (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

This Digest summarizes a paper by Lily Wong Fillmore and Catherine Snow, "What Teachers Need to Know About Language," available at www.cal.org/ericcll

This digest was prepared with funding from the U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Library of Education, under contract no. ED-99-CO-0008. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of ED, OERI, or NLE.